

Consider small-scale hog production for delicious food and reliable income

By Rev. J.D. Hooker

Usually, when someone forms a mental image of a self-sufficient backwoods lifestyle, the idea of raising a few hogs forms part of the picture. Whether we're thinking about the hill folk of Appalachia, the mountain people of the West, or wherever, slabs of smoked bacon, home-cured hams, buckets of homegrown corn, and leftover slops seem to fit right into the picture.

Ever since the founding of Jamestown and Plymouth, the production of pork, both for good home eating and for marketing or trading purposes, has played a crucial role in the personal independence of many of America's rural people. Hogs possess an amazing ability to thrive under conditions where other livestock could not even survive, and they convert nearly any remotely edible waste into high quality meat. Without hogs, not very many southern folk, white or black, would have managed to survive the incredibly hard, lean years in the battered, beaten, and plundered South following our devastating Civil War. Prior to the enforced death-march of their "Long Walk" to the Oklahoma territory, part of the way in which the Cherokee peoples maintained their independence and increased their wealth was that every household raised at least a small swine herd for home butchering and for market.

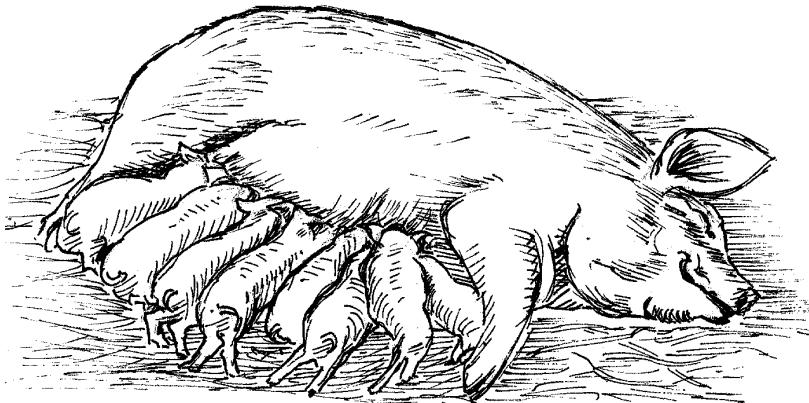
Advantages of a small-scale operation

Some of you will have seen the ultra-modern factory-style swine production facilities that turn out several thousands of identical market hogs every year. The idea of attempting to

compete with operations of such magnitude may seem impossible. However, you need to understand that the owners of these huge swine operations are virtually slaves to market factors and to their creditors. A single increase in feed costs, a drop in the market price, or a single otherwise-minor disease organism run amuck in their over-crowded pork factories can wipe out several years' worth of profits. The debt load carried by most such operations will often force the owners into bankruptcy after only one such incident, costing them the whole farm.

fluctuate upwards, you'd make even more income. And even if the market took a 50% nose dive, you'd still be able to realize about \$6,750 that year (while a high percentage of factory-style pork producers would go bust). This might be an over-simplification, but you can see how the ultra-low-budget, small-time producer really is the one who has the edge.

Still, while it's potentially lucrative, even such small-scale swine raising isn't something that you'd want to jump into overnight. You'll need to do some homework and preparation before you begin.



It's the small-scale pork producer, running between 100 and 500 hogs per year through the market, who might have an unfair advantage. Consider that selling about 110 hogs (no matter what the current price), for a 90%-plus profit will bring you about the same number of spendable dollars as selling 1000 hogs at the more usual 10% profit of the factory hog farm. Keeping a single good boar and five nice-quality sows, raising each litter to an optimum market weight of around 200 pounds per animal, and selling at the average market price will bring you an annual profit in the neighborhood of \$13,500. Should the prices

Two types of hogs

The first step is to honestly appraise your own temperament and abilities, as well as the physical aspects of your country property. Then decide on the type of hog that you and your property are best fitted to produce. There are many breeds and varieties, and they fall into two major divisions.

First you have the "confinement" type of hogs, like the Duroc, Hampshire, and Yorkshire, that can do well in crowded conditions. They breed, bear, and fatten nicely while fenced and sheltered in a relatively small area. However, they require daily care, feeding, water, etc. These

are possibly the ideal swine for the smaller farm or homestead, not requiring much acreage to bring in a reliable, steady income.

In the other major division are breeds like the Tamworth and Holstein (yes, there are Holstein hogs as well as Holstein cattle). These are capable of producing equally as well as the confinement breeds, while ranging loose in large fenced pastures or woodlots. These breeds require the absolute minimum of care, thriving and fattening quite well on grasses, acorns, roots, and such, which they can forage on their own. They require a much larger homestead acreage for successful production.

None of the confinement breeds do well when attempts are made to raise them under forage-type conditions. Forage-type hogs are equally unsuited for raising under confinement type systems. So this is something that you'll need to decide on before you set up your operation.

Strong and tight

Next you'll need to make a decision regarding what sort of facilities you'll need: shelter, fencing, farrowing huts, etc. This depends a lot on which type of hog you decide to raise. But keep in mind that ***any structure, for any type of hog, has to be both strong and tight.*** An adult hog is an immensely powerful animal, easily capable of breaking through poorly maintained fences or collapsing weak housing. And young pigs and shoats seem to delight in squirming out through the smallest break in any fencing or farrowing house. So whether you opt for wire field fencing or some type of wooden fence, and whatever sort of shelter seems right for your situation, make sure that your original installation is both strong and tight, and then make certain that it stays that way.

Feeding

It's in feeding the hogs where you'll find that the smaller producer has the edge over the factory farmer. It's the relatively high cost of commercial feed that forces these pork factories to work on such a high-volume, low-profit margin system. Sure, these high-dollar rations will normally bring their hogs to market weight much faster than less expensive feeds. But due to the feed costs involved, they usually need to produce *ten* market animals to match the profit realized by lower-volume breeders with a *single* marketable porker.

Many small-scale producers of forage-type hogs find that moving their herd three times a year works out the best for them. Their hogs spend the spring and early summer on mixed grass pasture; the late summer, fall, and sometimes early winter in the woodlot; and the largest share of the winter in the corn, bean, sorghum, or beet field that was planted for them, and left unharvested.

With our own Spot, Poland China, and Yorkshire confinement hogs, and our small operation, we've come up with a feed system that works great for us. We plant a mixture of corn, beans, and sorghum all together. The entire plants—cornstalks, beanstalks, and all—are harvested for feed. During the summer, we also feed a lot of fresh-mown hay or grass, saving the last cutting for winter hay. Also, every sort of garden waste, potato peels, damaged and spoilt tomatoes, wormy or bad apples, etc., is thrown to the hogs. We also feed them thoroughly cooked fish scraps and butchering wastes. To supplement the feed we produce ourselves, we've also found a bakery outlet store that will sell us a pickup load of stale bread, doughnuts, and other out-dated bakery products once a week or so, for next to nothing. This is a really worthwhile super-inexpensive addition for us, and they are happy to receive even a token

payment for this stuff, rather than paying to haul it to the dump.

Such mutually beneficial arrangements are well worth taking the time to find. Other small-scale breeders of confinement-type hogs have found restaurants, doughnut shops, produce wholesalers, supermarkets, farmer's markets, and other businesses whose owners have been happy to save their leftovers, damaged and imperfect produce, etc., for them in return for a token payment. Sometimes establishing such arrangements ends up being the determining factor in deciding the number of hogs your enterprise can support.

Buying your first hogs

As to the animals themselves, once you've determined whether you will be raising confinement- or forage-type swine, you'll need to settle on the particular breed (or breeds) you prefer. There are so many swine breeds (some common, others relatively rare) that this becomes mostly a matter of personal preference. Remember, though, that if there are other swine producers in your area, there will always be some demand for quality breeding stock, so it may be wise to stick with the breeds most popular in your area.

You'll need to select your own original breeding stock as carefully as possible. Check into the records of the producers you purchase your first stock from: litter size and survival rates, early weaning abilities, number of days to marketable weight, feed conversion rates, and related factors are all extremely important. Normally you'll pay quite a bit more for stock with a high production background, but it's well worth the extra cost.

Once our hog shelters, fencing, etc., were ready, and a steady and inexpensive feed supply assured, we were ready to buy our first hogs. Just-weaned shoats (young hogs)—one boar and four or five gilts (young female hogs)—is usually the best

option. Starting out with these small, young animals allowed us to become thoroughly familiar with their care while they were still small and easily managed. We also found that by hand-raising our breeding stock like family pets, we ended up with calm, easily managed adult breeders. As we've continued our operation, all of the swine selected as eventual breeding stock has been handled in the same manner.

This is a method which I recommend highly in any sort of livestock raising endeavor. There will always be unexpected developments, whether it's a difficult birth or a thousand-pound boar on the loose. When these things happen, it's so much simpler and safer to deal with an affectionate beast, rather than an indifferent or belligerent one, that I think it would be foolhardy to use any other method.

Caring for your hogs

You'll need to use wire cutters (diagonal cutters seem to work best) to nip off the razor-sharp needle teeth of newborn piglets, to keep them from injuring their dam while suckling. Sometimes I have tried skipping this step with animals I think I might be keeping for breeders. This is because in our area, we frequently have trouble with feralized dogs attacking livestock. So far, though, I've had pretty poor results, as the mothers usually find those needle teeth too painful. The few successes that I have had, though, have proved that swine with tusks intact can hold off dog attacks.

It's necessary to castrate the young male shoats which you don't intend to keep or sell as breeders. This is a simple, relatively painless procedure, done while the animals are still small. I've found the best tool for this to be a finely-honed sheepfoot pocket knife blade. I have read directions for attempting this procedure on your own, but I really wouldn't recommend attempting this by yourself on the first try. However, after watching someone

else, whether a veterinarian or an experienced hog farmer, cut a couple of shoats, you'll be able to do it yourself.

Hogs also have a few other needs. Chief among these is plenty of water. In fact, *fresh drinking water is the most important part of a pig's diet.*

They'll also need some way of keeping cool in the summer. Whether that would involve providing some sort of shade, a mud wallow or sprinkler, a creek or ditch flowing through your pasture or woodlot, or some electric fans in the barn, will depend upon your particular circumstances. Too much heat can kill a hog mighty quickly, so you'll need to come up with something.

Winter brings a different set of considerations. Adult hogs that aren't kept in seriously over-crowded conditions can stand an awful lot of severe cold, without any ill effects. *But, drafts can kill them off pretty quickly when they sleep.* Even forage-type hogs need someplace to curl up out of the wind when they sleep. You'll also find that any sort of hog shelter for winter use must either have a dirt floor, where the animals can scoop out a nice comfy nesting hole, or you'll need to furnish a plentiful supply of straw, sawdust, leaves, or other *dry* bedding, at all times.

While forage-type sows usually manage to care for their offspring just fine through weaning, you'll normally find that confinement breeds need a little extra care in this regard. That's because the adult sow can handle cold temperatures, but not heat, so she's constantly standing up, moving around, repositioning herself, and flopping back down in order to remain relatively cool and comfortable. However, *her offspring need to be kept warm all of the time*, and even a minor cooling off can kill them. There is also the constant danger of the sow crushing some of her offspring when she plops back down. There is a simple remedy: just hang an inexpensive heat lamp over one corner of the far-

rowing pen or hut. This supplies a steady source of warmth for the piglets. The small animals will tend to congregate under this heat lamp whenever they're not busy feeding off the sow, while their dam will avoid the discomfort of this added heat. That avoids the danger of her inadvertently crushing the infants.

Marketing

After a while, you'll learn to judge by eye just when your hogs reach the optimum market weight. After that, your only remaining difficulty is in loading the animals into an enclosed truck or trailer and hauling them to market. I've heard of a whole slew of methods for loading these generally reluctant creatures for hauling, and most of them seem to work well enough. But the only means of loading hogs into my truck that I've found satisfactory involves nothing more than a solid ramp with fenced sides and a good, hard-working dog.

If all of this sounds like a lot of hard work, remember that it's not some sort of easy get-rich-quick scheme, but just one method for independent-minded rural folks to provide themselves with a decent, steady, reliable income. It's not nearly as much hard work as all this might sound like, either, but it does require a steady daily routine of care and maintenance. So why not look into your own circumstances and see if this truly traditional slice of American independence can add to your own situation.

And remember the added bonus of providing your own succulent pork roasts, smoked hams, etc., practically *for free* as a side benefit of this profitable endeavor. That served as the final determining factor for us, when we first considered raising swine for profit. We feel as if this result alone, even apart from the income we've earned, has been well worth the effort. I strongly recommend small-scale pork production as one of the ideal backwoods enterprises. Δ